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Capital Reading

Young Novelist Is Singed By Marquand's Torch

Reviewed by Glendy Culligan

P. S. WILKINSON. By C. D. B. Bryan. Harper & Row. 441 pp. \$5.95.

REST IN PEACE, JOHN MARQUAND, wherever you are—and where could you be but in some well-appointed Heaven where the angels all went to the right prep schools and the Heavenly choir resounds with the accents of Harvard Yard? When you died, Mr. Marquand, the demise of the gentleman-hero in American fiction seemed an immediate consequence, his place in the pantheon quickly taken by the uncommonly common man, which is to say, the slob. But now, a clever young novelist wearing an old school tie himself has picked up the torch you dropped.

Like the late George Apley he created, the late John Marquand was a product of Boston Brahmanism, whereas C. D. B. Bryan speaks for the hunt country which surrounds our own city. Minor details of accent and atmosphere aside, however, the two novelists describe the same milieu, for hereditary real estate produces about the same etiquette syndrome whatever the climate, and very much the same moral dilemmas.

Although that phrase had not then become a cliché Marquand's heroes were all "alienated," caught between the unworkable ethos of an obsolete class structure and the unpalatable ethic of a new one. The difference between them and the more current products of the cult of alienation is largely one of idiom. Alienated or not, the aristocrat must think and act in the language of the class that educated him; Henry Miller's vocabulary and William Burroughs's pathology are as much beyond as they are beneath him.

THIS CLASS conscience—at once a strength and a weakness—is apparent in

Bryan's first novel, winner of the 1965 Harper Prize for fiction. Bryan's hero, 1st Lt. Philip Sadler Wilkinson, is serving with Army Intelligence in Korea at the start; at the finish he's back in uniform at Fort Lewis, Wash., because of the Berlin crisis.

In between, through flashbacks and the forward movement of the narrative, we meet his affluent divorced parents, his socially prominent relatives on Baltimore's Charles Street, his conventional chums at Episcopal High School in Alexandria; his college sweetheart, now unhappily married. We applaud when P. S. Wilkinson defies his CO's order to shave the head of a Korean prostitute because he knows the Army has no jurisdiction over civilians. We squirm over the indignity of his polygraph test at CIA. We watch his failure to "find himself" in Washington, Baltimore and New York after his return to civilian life, and worry over his inability to make a commitment, either in work or in love.

All this is rendered in the language of the soft



C. D. B. Bryan

sell: smooth as Hollandaise, dry as sautern, unobtrusive as good gray flannel. Like its parallel in merchandising, literary understatement assumes as well as reflects good taste; that's why we happy few million like and buy it.

It also reflects a certain commercial acumen. Bryan has profitably studied the pros, including his stepfather John O'Hara. Consequently his novel moves with the quiet efficiency of a good racing motor—say, the Lancia driven by one of his characters.

But even with a good motor, wheels will spin idly when a car runs off the track. So it is with this bright, superficial novel, which goes nowhere. Its failure may be a function of the age of its author (Yale, '58), who has not yet achieved sufficient distance from his material, and so confuses P. S. Wilkinson's growing pains with the sickness of society.

Which is not to maintain that our society couldn't use some good doctors. The trouble is that, when judged by his own banal statements, P. S. Wilkinson just doesn't stack up as a diagnostician.